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Politics & Government

Proposed Cell Tower to Look Like a 162-Foot-Tall Tree

Neighbors living on Cobblers Hill Court and surrounding streets are rallying opposition against the tower.

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A *Connecticut Post* story about AT&T's proposal to erect a 162-foot-tall cellular tower at 30 Cobblers Hill Court last week upset many neighboring residents. Some say First Selectman Steve Vavrek should have informed them soon after receiving a letter from the phone company's attorney on July 31, but Vavrek contends he had planned to when the article came out beforehand.

"There's nothing being done behind anyone's back," Vavrek said during an interview in his town hall office Thursday. "It's normal procedure. No one wants to hear this first through the press. It was going to be done."

The first selectman has since visited residents on Cobblers Hill Court and the surrounding neighborhood and shared information on the project being proposed by New Cingular Wireless, PCS, LLC (AT&T).

Vavrek said "misinformation" had been circulating around town and stressed that the tower is "not a done deal".

The State Siting Council has exclusive decision making power over the approval or denial of cell tower applications, but an applicant first must notify the town and any municipality within 2,500 feet of the proposed location and provide a technical report for a municipal consultation.

Connecticut General Statute Section 16-50/ also allows a

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Patch AM: American Red Cross Blood Drive at UMC Monroe and 11 more events municipality to host a public information meeting to gather input for the applicant, according to Lucia Chioccho, an attorney for AT&T who wrote the letter to Vavrek.

Chioccho wrote, "Should the Town of Monroe elect to conduct a public meeting regarding AT&T's project sometime prior to October 1, 2013, AT&T would be pleased to make a presentation."

On Thursday, Vavrek said a public information meeting has been scheduled for 7 p.m. on Sept. 10 in the Council Chambers of Monroe Town Hall.

"There will be a chance for public input," he said.

The municipal consultation process begins 90 days before an application may be filed with the Siting Council.

In the *Post* article, Newtown First Selectwoman Patricia Llodra said she had not heard of the tower proposal — even though Newtown is within 2,500 feet of the property.

Bothered by this oversight, Vavrek said he has made it a point to invite Llodra and other Newtown officials to join Monroe's town leaders in meeting with phone company representatives to discuss details of the proposal.

What's Being Proposed?

According to the application filed in the Land Use Department of town hall, AT&T wants to erect a wireless tower to provide "reliable wireless communication in northern portions of Monroe."

To illustrate the need, Chioccho pointed out how AT&T deployed a temporary wireless facility at Chalk Hill in December of 2012 "so that the school complex had access to critical wireless services as part of its use by the Sandy Hook School."

Vavrek noted that Monroe's police and other emergency services use Verizon, so AT&T is only talking about cellular communication in general.

It would be built on a 36-acre, undeveloped parcel owned by Quarry Ridge Associates, LLC, and serve AT&T and its competing providers who would lease antennas on the tower.

The tower would be a new monopine design, which is supposed to look like a tree.

It would be within a 75' X '75 fenced compound within a 100' by 100' lease area with access from Cobblers Hill Court via a new 12-foot-wide, 1,634-foot long gravel driveway. This would provide vehicle access for maintenance of the tower, its generator and other equipment.

Utility connections would be routed underground along the proposed driveway.

The application says the tower would be visible within a two-mile radius.

The environmental impact study found there would be no pollutants to the surface and ground water systems and that air quality would meet Connecticut Department of Energy & Environmental Protection standards.

The Wrong Location?

AT&T says a site search found no existing structures or facilities to place antennas and listed 14 locations that were considered for a tower before determining 30 Cobblers Hill Court was the "only feasible alternative".

Some of the locations AT&T decided against were on streets it says have coverage gaps, including Fan Hill Road, Hammertown Road, Wheeler Road, Grist Mill Road, Grindstone Lane, Turkey Roost Road, Wild Horse Court, Mustang Drive and Pinto Lane. There were also other places considered on Cobblers Hill Court.

But neighbors say 30 Cobblers Hill Court is the wrong place for a tower.

Darren Cummings of Cobblers Hill Court organized 25 neighbors to oppose AT&T's application. He spoke before the Planning & Zoning Commission on Thursday night and plans to garner the 50 signatures needed to get a public hearing before the Town Council.

When they found out about the proposal on Friday, Cummings said he and his wife, Arlene, distributed fliers about it in their neighborhood.

He accuses AT&T of exploiting the tragic shooting at Sandy Hook School to make a case for its tower.

The neighborhood group does not question the need for improved wireless coverage and public safety. However, it proposes building a tower on town-owned property so Monroe can get lease revenue.

Cummings expressed his belief that a taller tower could be built at Chalk Hill or that smaller wireless facilities could be built at multiple locations to cover the gaps.

Arlene Cummings said she is concerned that allowing AT&T to build a tower in their neighborhood would set a precedent of "big cell phone companies" coming into towns and placing towers wherever they want.

Darren Cummings grew up in Monroe and he and his wife bought a house in town in 2001, before moving into their colonial on Cobblers Hill Court three years ago. The couple's three children attend Fawn Hollow Elementary School and they and their neighbors enjoy living in a town with a strong rural character.

In a letter submitted to the Planning & Zoning Commission

Thursday night, the group writes, "In the future, we would like to make a statement to these large cell companies that we want our town to remain scenic and the way to achieve this is not by installing towers into the backyards of family communities."

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